# WHY CAN'T I EVER FIND ANYTHING IN THE LIBRARY?

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**Introduction**
The desperate *cri de coeur* in the title of this article is all too familiar to university librarians. It is sometimes stated more forthrightly as 'I can never find anything in the library', an excuse not infrequently advanced by students to explain poor performance in tutorials or assignments. Those who utter these phrases are not impressed by the fact that every year hundreds of thousands of books were found and borrowed, and perhaps four times as many were found and used within the library. Exaggerated though they are, these expressions of user frustration do indicate the existence of a significant problem in access to information in university libraries. It is a problem which should capture the attention of all library administrators, and indeed of all who believe that the substantial investment made in university libraries should result in a service which produces the goods.

User failure in the library is of two types. Either the user cannot find the wanted item in the library catalogue, or, having found it there, is unable to locate the item on the shelves. Failure is not always the user's fault. The library may fail by not acquiring the wanted item, by not cataloguing it correctly, or by not reshelving it promptly in its correct place, to cite only a few examples. On the other hand, the user may be responsible for the failure by, for example, not using the catalogue correctly or by not being able to find her or his way in the collection. Whatever the cause, every instance of failure in a research library has a detrimental effect on study and research.

The problem of user failure in libraries has received some attention from librarians in Britain and the United States.[1] Two Australian studies have also been reported.[2] Most studies have found overall failure rates of between forty and fifty per cent; in other words, each time a patron enters a university library there is only a fifty to sixty per cent chance that she or he will find the materials wanted. That is a worrying statistic.

This paper reports the results of a research project at the University of Sydney, funded by ARGS, to determine the extent to which library patrons fail to find wanted material and the reasons for their failure. The study was concerned only with failure to find known items — i.e. items for which the user had a bibliographic citation. Attempts to find material on a subject, or success at browsing, were excluded. The study investigated failure both at the catalogue and at the shelves in the main library of the University (the Fisher Library). The University of Sydney Library (Fisher and fifteen branches) is Australia's largest and busiest university library, with holdings approaching three million volumes.

**Methodology**
Following a pilot study in April, 1981 the main study was conducted during seven weeks equally spaced over the period June-November, 1981 (excluding weeks of vacations or examinations). For each day in each survey week the University of Sydney's Sample Survey Centre provided a schedule specifying the time period(s) in which the survey should be conducted, which part of the Library it should cover, and the number of interviews which were to be obtained there. The Centre's advice, which was designed to ensure a valid and representative sampling of all Library users in all appropriate parts of the catalogue and collections, was based upon data of patterns of use supplied by the Library. The advice and assistance of the Sample Survey Centre was invaluable, and is gratefully acknowledged.

For the catalogue component of the study, interviewers observed users at the catalogues according to the schedules drawn up by the Sample Survey Centre and approached users who had just completed looking in a drawer of cards. The user was asked whether the item which was sought had been found. For a positive response the interviewer recorded a successful search; in the case of a negative response the user was asked what she or he had been searching for and as full a description as possible was recorded on a form, along with the status of the user (undergraduate student, postgraduate student, academic staff, or other).

These failures were subsequently checked by librarians on the survey team to ascertain, if possible, the reasons for the user's failure. If the item could not be traced in the catalogue with the information given an attempt was made to verify the bibliographic details in standard sources.

For the shelf component of the study, interviewers observed users at the shelves according to the predetermined schedule and approached people who appeared to have finished looking for something. The user was asked whether she or he had been looking for a specific item (as distinct from browsing) and if that was the case, whether it had been found. As before, a positive response was recorded as a successful search, while full details were taken in the case of failure. These failures were promptly followed up by librarians to ascertain, if possible, the reason for failure.

The data were encoded and processed by computer using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).



**Results**
*Overall*
A total of 2,991 library users was interviewed, of whom 2,497 provided information relevant to the study. The remainder were either not seeking a specific known item or declined to cooperate.

Table 1 summarises the data relating to the success or failure experiences of the 2,497 users whose activities fell within the scope of the study. The overall failure rate was 35.9% but undergraduates, the largest group of library users, experienced a slightly higher rate of failure, 37.4%.

**TABLE 1: SUMMARY RESULTS**

| | Failures (Failure Rate) | Successes | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Undergraduates | 661 (37.4%) | 1,106 | 1,767 |
| Postgraduates | 95 (33.9%) | 185 | 280 |
| Academics | 21 (21.9%) | 75 | 96 |
| Other | 120 (33.9%) | 234 | 354 |
| TOTAL | 897 (35.9%) | 1,600 | 2,497 |

Because of differences in methodology it is difficult to compare these results with findings elsewhere. The majority of other studies have used a questionnaire approach and have based their results on the responses of a self-selected sample. Their findings have generally shown an overall failure rate of between 40% and 50%[3] but it is at least possible that frustrated users were more likely to respond to the questionnaire than those who had met with success. The actual failure rate may really be lower than these studies suggest. Two studies which appear to have been conducted in a similar way to the present one showed overall failure rates of 35.4%[4] and 37.1%[5]; the Sydney figure can therefore be said to be comparable to other findings.

The overall failure rate, although interesting, is a less useful statistic than the failure rates experienced by library users when searching in the catalogue and at the shelves.

*Catalogue Failure*
The Fisher Library has a number of catalogues, the three main ones being the Name Catalogue (i.e. authors, titles, and books about authors), the Serials Catalogue and the Subject Catalogue. The study, being concerned only with searches for known items, covered the Name and Serials Catalogues. Failure rates in both were almost identical, being 26.3% and 26.2% respectively. The overall catalogue failure rate was 26.2%. Table 2 summarises the data relating to the 1,281 catalogue users whose activities fell within the scope of the study.

**TABLE 2: CATALOGUE SEARCHES**

| | Failures (Failure Rate) | Successes | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Undergraduates | 217 (25.4%) | 639 | 856 |
| Postgraduates | 45 (29.8%) | 106 | 151 |
| Academics | 15 (20.8%) | 57 | 72 |
| Other | 59 (29.2%) | 143 | 202 |
| TOTAL | 336 (26.2%) | 945 | 1,281 |

A number of studies of catalogue use and the success and failure of users have employed the questionnaire approach and have based their findings on a self-selected sample of respondents. Several studies, however, have employed the observation and interview approach of the Sydney study, and it is with these that the Sydney results should be compared.

The largest was the American Library Association's 1958 analysis of 5,494 interviews of catalogue users in thirty-nine libraries of all types and sizes.[6] The overall failure rate for known-item searches was 34%. If we consider only the data from the seventeen academic and research libraries which were part of the study, the failure rate was 31.7%. A similar multi-library study was conducted in 1968-69 at the University of Michigan (covering its General, Undergraduate, and Medical Libraries) and the nearby Ann Arbor Public Library.[7] The overall failure rate for known-item searches was 28.1%, and if we consider only the data from the General Library (which would parallel the Sydney study) the failure rate was 19%. Third, in 1970 Lipetz studied catalogue use at Yale University's Stirling Library and found a failure rate of 16% for known-item searches.[8]

The findings of the Sydney study, that in 26.2% of attempts the users of its catalogues fail to find known items they are seeking, are generally in line with the findings of these similar studies.

More important than the rate of failure are the reasons for failure occurring. Table 3 summarises the results of post-interview searching by library staff to ascertain them.

**TABLE 3: REASONS FOR CATALOGUE FAILURES**

| Reason | Occurrences | % of Total Failures |
|---|---|---|
| **Library failure** | | |
| Item not held | 127 | 37.8 |
| **User failure** | | |
| In catalogue, as cited, but not found | 84 | 25.0 |
| In catalogue, as cited, but retrievable | 38 | 11.3 |
| Citation incorrect | 50 | 14.9 |
| Used wrong catalogue | 36 | 10.7 |
| Other | 1 | 0.3 |
| Sub-total, user failures | 209 | 62.2 |
| TOTAL | 336 | 100.0 |

It is clear that the majority of failures occurred through user failure. More than one-third of the failures occurred because, although the item was listed in the catalogue and the user had sufficient information to enable it to be found advantage was not taken of all the clues available, or the user did not use them correctly. Nearly fifteen per cent of failures occurred because the user had a citation which was too far from being correct to enable the item to be found (most commonly a misspelling of the author's surname).

Overall, 62.2% of the failures, or 16.3% of all searches attempted, were due to user error of one kind or another. This result tallies well with other findings. In the ALA study[6] user failure accounted for 54.4% of all failures and 17.2% of all searches; at the University of Michigan General Library[7] user failure accounted for 67.8% of all failures and 12.9% of all searches; Lipetz found at Yale[8] that user failure was less serious, being 37.5% of failures and only six per cent of all searches. This difference is possibly due to the fact that at Yale the majority of catalogue users were postgraduate students or academic staff, whereas at Sydney undergraduates were in a clear majority.

No library can possess everything that has ever been printed, so some failures at the catalogue were inevitably due to what might be called Library failure — the failure of the Library to have anticipated a need for some items and to have acquired and catalogued them. Library failure represented 37.8% of all failures at the catalogue. Considered in terms of all searches at the catalogue, library failure due to the item not being held accounted for 9.9%. Again, this result is in line with others. The A.L.A. study found that 14.5% of catalogue searches ended in failure because the item was not held, 6.1% failed at the University of Michigan General Library for the same reason[7], and ten per cent at Yale.[8] Two studies at Case Western Reserve University recorded failure rates of 12.3% and 8.7% due to the wanted items not being held by the library.[9]

Expressed another way, the University of Sydney Library holds 90.1% of the items its users seek there, but more than a quarter of the searches in its catalogues will end in failure. Nearly two-thirds of the failures can be categorized as user failure, for one reason or another.

*Shelf Failure*

Having found a wanted item in a library's catalogue, the next step — and often the next stumbling block — is to locate that item on the shelves. The present study investigated the extent of and reasons for failure to find wanted items in the two major collections in the Fisher Library, the Research and Undergraduate Collections which are in adjoining wings of the same building. The Undergraduate Library is an open access collection of some 130,000 volumes, most titles being in multiple copies, while the Research Library is an open access collection of approximately 1.5 million volumes in a tower bookstack wing. The Dewey Decimal Classification is used in both collections, with the symbol "U" preceding the classification numbers for Undergraduate Library books.

Failure rates in the two collections were almost identical, being 47.6% in the Research Library and 44.7% in the Undergraduate Library. The overall shelf failure rate was 46.1%. Table 4 summarises the data relating to the 1,216 searches at the shelves which fell within the scope of the study.

**TABLE 4: SHELF SEARCHES**

| | Failures (Failure Rate) | Successes | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Undergraduates | 444 (48.7%) | 467 | 911 |
| Postgraduates | 50 (38.8%) | 79 | 129 |
| Academics | 6 (25.0%) | 18 | 24 |
| Other | 61 (40.1%) | 91 | 152 |
| TOTAL | 561 (46.1%) | 655 | 1,216 |

Almost all other shelf failure studies have relied upon responses of a self-selected sample of users rather than approaching people actually searching at the shelves. Other studies have either distributed questionnaires to people entering the library, asking them to report their experiences and to give details of any failures before leaving the building, or have asked users failing to find wanted items at the shelves to leave behind details of the items sought unsuccessfully. It is at least possible that respondents in the former situation are not a representative sample of all users; in the latter situation no overall measure of success versus failure is possible.

It is difficult, then, to compare accurately the findings of the Sydney study, which questioned a representative sample of shelf users to ascertain their measure of success or failure in finding known items. Such comparisons as can be made seem to indicate that the overall failure rate of 46.1% is similar to or higher than that experienced elsewhere. At the University of California, Riverside[10] and San Jose State University[11] questionnaires given to patrons asking, *inter alia*, whether they had found wanted items revealed failure rates of 26% and 24% respectively. However, a similar study at the Undergraduate Library of the University of Tennessee[12] found that 46.2% of shelf searches were unsuccessful. Two interview studies at the Science Library of Case Western Reserve University found shelf failure rates of 45.3% and 38.6% respectively.[13]

The fact that almost one in two searches at the shelves for known items which are held by the library is doomed to end in failure represents a worrying hindrance to the work of students and staff. Pinpointing the reasons for these failures and devising remedial measures to reduce them is therefore of considerable importance. Table 5 summarizes the results of post-interview searching by library staff to ascertain this.

**TABLE 5: REASONS FOR SHELF FAILURES**

| Reason | Occurrences | % of Total Failures |
|---|---|---|
| **User failure** | | |
| Wrong/incomplete call no. | 134 | 23.9 |
| Looked in wrong collection | 98 | 17.4 |
| On shelf, in correct place or close by, but not found | 84 | 15.0 |
| Sub-total, user failures | 316 | 56.3 |
| **Other reasons** | | |
| On loan | 103 | 18.4 |
| Removed to Special Reserve | 70 | 12.5 |
| Unaccounted for | 32 | 5.7 |
| On sorting shelves | 25 | 4.4 |
| Known to be elsewhere or missing | 15 | 2.7 |
| TOTAL | 561 | 100.0 |

As with failure at the catalogues, it is clear that a majority of shelf failures occurred because of mistakes made by the user. Nearly one quarter of the failures were due to the user having wrongly or incompletely transcribed the book's call number from the catalogue card. This represented the most important single reason for failure at the shelf, and the incidence of 23.9% for this error is very considerably higher than that found in other studies, which have generally been of the order of 2% to 10%.[14] The present authors are unable to guess the reason for this significant discrepancy.

More than seventeen per cent of the shelf failures were due to the user having sought a book in the wrong collection. As all books located in collections other than the Research Library have their locations indicated on the catalogue card (e.g. by a "U" prefix for books in the Undergraduate Library or by the name of a branch library), this amounts to a failure on the user's part to appreciate the significance of the location information provided. The library must take the initiative in ensuring that the various location symbols employed are understood by its users.

The third cause of user failure, an inability to find the book on the shelf where it was located, even when she or he was searching in the right collection, resulted in 15% of all shelf failures. Clearly, some users are unable to understand the arrangement of books on the shelves of a library, a finding in accord with other studies which have found that, generally, 15%-25% of items reported as not found are in fact on the shelf.[15]

Of the reasons for shelf failure which cannot be blamed on the user, the unavailability of the item due to its having been borrowed by another person is the most significant. In the present study 18.4% of shelf failures were caused by the book being in circulation. Other studies have generally found circulation to be the cause of a larger proportion of their shelf failures.

The effect of shelf failure can be expressed another way. Nearly half of the known items which readers seek on the shelf will not be found, and more than half of the failures can be categorized as user failure.

**Conclusion**

The results of the study overall could be summarized thus: The Fisher Library holds 90% of the items its users seek, but more than a quarter of the searches in its catalogues and almost half the searches on its shelves will end in failure. Overall, 36% of those who enter its doors seeking a known item will leave without finding it, and half the time the failure will be the user's own fault. These findings are, generally speaking, in line with those of similar studies in other libraries.

There are lessons in the present study for all who seek to maximise the benefits from the very consid-

erable investment which universities make in their libraries.

Collection adequacy is very high, with the library owning 90% of all items its users seek. However, as Swanson has pointed out, *people try to use the library only when they have good reason to think they will succeed*[16] and it is plausible to suppose that repeated failures will discourage future attempts.

For those who do persist, it is clear that the catalogue — and particularly a large catalogue — is often an insurmountable obstacle. To an extent, librarians must take the blame for this. Their choices of entry and of filing hierarchies, while usually consistent and logical, are not always those expected by the innocent user, and remain mysterious to many for whose benefit they were created. Also the card catalogue is not notably hospitable to alternative search approaches or to errors on the user's part. The move to machine-readable catalogues providing interactive search capability on a variety of bibliographical elements is likely to bring considerable improvement. Until such facilities are available the library must redouble its efforts to instruct users in the principles of catalogue use and must endeavour to have knowledgeable librarians on hand to assist those who appear to be in trouble.

The large proportion of shelf failure which is also due to users' errors is further proof of the need for more intensive and extensive programs of user education, and for the ready availability of staff to assist the unsuccessful searcher. Again, it is likely that librarians are partly at fault for having made their libraries unnecessarily complicated and difficult to use. The arrangement of books in a large bookstack is complex and often beyond the understanding of the user for whom it has been designed. Improvements in signposting and shelf layout are among the remedial measures which should be implemented. Again, the larger the library the more separate locations there are likely to be for the various parts of the collections, and clear guidance in the meaning and importance of location information is essential.

It is a cliché, though a true one, that the library is the heart of the university, and that a first quality library is essential to a first quality university. However, the library should be much more than *'a singular ornament in the University'*, to quote Sir Thomas Bodley's hope for the library he gave to Oxford. It should be a partner in the processes of teaching, learning and research, but it will be a weak partner unless it can deliver the goods.

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# ART STUDY AND THE ART MARKET: WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITIES?


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A small group of energetic and well-intentioned Visual Arts students at the Flinders University recently set about the organization of a selling exhibition of so-called 'transitional' art on the campus, with the generous intention of making the profits of their enterprise available to the University's Art Museum for the acquisition of new art works for the Collection. This Collection, it should be noticed, has the primary function of serving the teaching and research needs of the Visual Arts Discipline, as well as those of other researchers and students of art. 'Transitional' art is work displaying a marked influence of one culture on another (usually the Western influences on, e.g., North-West Coast Amerindian, or Australian Aboriginal) and it is a topic of special interest within Visual Arts at Flinders.

Of course an occasional art sale held on a university campus, yielding (most probably) little or no profit, is not a dramatic sample of the art market in action. Nevertheless it **is** a sample of the art market in action, and we had better decide what significant questions of principle, if any, are implicated. Why, for example, should we not establish a regular art dealership operating directly through the Museum, to its own profitable advantage? If that is different, precisely how is it different, apart from scale and regularity of operation?

The first strong point to be made must surely be that no Australian university can be taken to task for engaging in and with the normal affairs and practices of the external world *tout court*. To be more specific: we at Flinders see ourselves as part of the world and not as isolated from it. We are interested in the things that interest everyone; we are supported in a range of ways by public and private funding; we see nothing wrong in principle with the buying and selling of works of art as contrasted with commerce in other goods and we are generally pleased and grateful to have our teaching and research supported by donors who think well of us. No universal claim that scholarship and commerce are incompatible can be made to seem remotely plausible.

Some comparisons may be useful. In spite of the ambivalence many people feel toward drugs and — quite independently — toward multinational corporations, nobody seriously argues that funding injected more or less directly by multi-national drug corporations into medical pharmacological and biochemical research in the universities should all be rejected. We are thoroughly accustomed to seeing the profits of commercial enterprise of all kinds enter the domain of scholarship, even to the extent of commissioning specific research. The universities themselves are engaging more and more in the marketing of ideas and inventions, and are extremely alert to the advantages of patent ownership, property rights and other niceties of the business apparatus.

Resistance to the complete assimilation of university scholarship into the world's ordinary economic, social and commercial routines is concentrated at two main positions: a sort of defence in depth, with more determination applied at the fall-back position than at the front line. The front line is drawn roughly where commercial pressures begin to determine what will be researched and taught in the universities. This line is manned principally by extremely conservative academic ideologues who insist that a socially endorsed economic need for (let us say) cheaper energy, or new energy sources, should in no way influence the direction of scientific research in the universities — although it may legitimately do so in other parts of the tertiary system and in publicly funded research organisations such as C.S.I.R.O. It is not at all clear what should influence these directions: the conception of 'pure' research is notoriously obscure. The ultimate cash value of an increment of knowledge is often not assessable, and provides a woefully inadequate criterion of purity.

The fall-back position is more vigorously defended by many more academics. If the universities are to retain their distinctive character and, indeed, their ultimate *raison d'etre*, the encroachment of ordinary commerce must be resisted not so much — if at all — at the point of determination of what is studied as at the point of determination of how it shall be studied. Very roughly indeed, it is said to be the scholar's business to perpetuate certain laboriously acquired and correspondingly precious standards of probity in the conduct of intellectual business. Scientific research must be conducted scientifically; research in art history must conform to the principles of 'the art historical method', and so on. Moral and political considerations can — so it is often suggested — be treated either as irrelevant or as already incorporated into the methodology of scholarship. For example, the testing of a new drug will go forward, in a university, strictly in accordance with a rigorous procedure built in to the methodology of the subject, ensuring that certain kinds of carelessness — and especially the more profitable kinds — do not occur. To put the point with crude simplicity: the distinctive function of the universities